

WOMEN AND PERSONS

I

INTRODUCTION

The basic premise of women's liberation is that women have the right to self-determination. This premise involves a commitment to two further statements, namely:

- 1) All persons have the right to self-determination; and
- 2) Women have been denied the right to self-determination.

One could say that what it is to be a woman has been considered different in at least one important way from what it is to be a person.

II

ALL PERSONS HAVE THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination is to actively affirm a life goal for oneself and to actively engage in achieving that goal. It is essential that both kinds of activity take place for self-determination. For example, if one's life goal is adopted unconsciously even though a person actively engages in achieving that goal, it would not be sufficient for self-determination. An example of this might be a young girl who accepts society's mandate for marriage as her life goal and

actively engages in finding a suitable husband. She would not have completed the first requirement for self-determination, viz. active affirmation of life goal. Specifically, she would not have chosen the goal in a way that involved previous reflection on alternatives. Active affirmation is different from enthusiastic unreflection. An example of failing to fulfill the second criterion for self-determination would be a woman who chooses to be a politician but is unable to actively pursue it because of her particular society's prejudice against women in politics. In this case, self-determination does not occur because she has not been able to actively engage in achieving her goal.

So when I say that all persons have the right to self-determination I mean that all persons have the right to actively affirm their life goals and to actively engage in achieving these goals. Two points must be made about self-determination before I continue. First, in this paper I am concerned only with self-determination not with self-fulfillment. The difference is that self-determination is a precondition for self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment is dependent upon several other factors which remain to some extent out of the control of the individual. For example, to be fulfilled in life one must have deep and long lasting friendships, a sense of the value of one's life work, mental and physical health, freedom from poverty, and so on. In this paper I will not discuss factors relating to self-fulfillment but will in-

stead limit myself to one pre-condition for fulfillment, viz. self-determination. It is possible to have self-determination without self-fulfillment and impossible to have self-fulfillment without self-determination.

My second point about self-determination is that it is an on-going process. Life goals are not chosen once and for all. On the contrary, they are constantly being rechosen. While I will limit myself in this paper to discussing self-determination at any particular time in life, it is understood that this process is and should be a continuous one throughout an entire life. A life goal then is a specific time chosen through reflection which gives a meaning and structure to everything we do.

Immediately we face another contentious issue: the question of right vs. privilege. There is a paradox at the core of the right to self-determination. Specifically, in order to justify a right to self-determination one must appeal to human nature; and in order to explain human nature one must include self-determination.

There are ways of resolving this paradox. We could say that all persons have the potentiality for self-determination by virtue of being born human but that only those who actualize this, i.e. those who actively live a life of continuous self-determination are persons in the full sense.¹ This resolution

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Sartre takes this approach in Being and Nothingness. "Human reality is not something which exists first in order afterwards to lack this or that; it exists first as a lack and in immediate, synthetic connection with what it lacks." Being and Nothingness, Hazel Barnes trans., Philosophical Library, New York, p. 89.

is unsatisfying, however, in that it leads to all sorts of other problems like the difference between un-self-determined persons and the rest of nature, the lack of sensitivity to shared human characteristics, and so on. The fact is that persons live with different levels of self-determination. We are a person precisely because we have the right to self-determination and we have that right precisely because we are a person. There is no satisfactory resolution to this paradox of the right to self-determination.

Historically this right has been abdicated frequently by groups in society and by individuals in a group. In these cases the abdication has often occurred unconsciously and occasionally consciously. In general, however, the person or group which has received the abdication has then incorporated it until the right to self-determination for the abdicater was seen as a privilege. For anyone trying to win back their birthright it became a struggle which invariably led back to the central question: What is it to be a person? Aristotle believed that only a few male persons should be self-determined, Kierkegaard believed that all male persons should be self-determined, and today we find a different approach altogether. Those who had abdicated their right to self-determination and who demand it back are doing so for everyone - female as well as male persons. This right in no way can be seen as a privilege extended to any group or individual in a society; it is the birthright of any child coming forth from its mother's womb. To ask why

this should be so is to ask why a baby must take that first breath of air. Once you have tasted the sweetness and pain of this birthright no rational argument could ever dissuade you to abdicate it again.

Someone might wish to argue with me at this point that my appeal to experience is just not enough to prove that the right to self-determination is a birthright. She or he could say that I am appealing to some ineffable self-evident experience which leaves little else to be said. I would answer that this criticism is correct. In the end there is little more than can be said. Of course I could point out that the other alternative - namely that the right of self-determination is not a birthright leads to some very unfortunate consequences. Then we might examine some of these consequences together. One such consequence involves the problem of one person deciding what is good for another. The practice of binding the feet of Chinese female babies before a girl could conceivably choose the other alternative ends up with a deformed adult incapable of running or walking freely. Similarly, I could argue that the practice of programing young girls to abdicate self-determination frequently ends up with deformed women incapable of full self-determination. Here, however, my critic and I would eventually have to return to the question of what it is to be a person and there would be no further court of appeal.

There is also another way to object to my appeal to self-evidence in the case of the right to self-determination for all persons. This time my critic might say, using the

same line of reasoning as above, that there are some very unfortunate consequences of my claiming that women have the right to self-determination. They might use the familiar example: If women can be self-determined then what happen to the children?² Here again I must point out that I am not discussing the responsibilities of self-determination but merely the principle that all persons have the right to it.

The right to self-determination can not be established by an appeal to consequences in either direction. It must be based on the criteria for being a person. To argue from consequences is to place the cart before the horse. Consequences are important not in establishing self-determination as a right but in considering the rights of others; and this leads us into the larger problem of self-fulfillment.

III

WOMEN HAVE BEEN DENIED THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION

The distinguished philosopher Immanuel Kant had the following observations to make about women:

All the other merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is the proper reference point; and among the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly

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Margaret Mead argues this way in Male and Female and in recent press interviews.

stands out as the criterion of his kind. All judgments of the two sexes must refer to this criteria...-unless one wants to disguise the charming distinction that nature has chosen to make between the two sorts of human being. For here it is not enough to keep in mind that we are dealing with human beings; we must also remember that they are not all alike. 3

The crucial point here and the one I want to devote the remainder of the paper to is the claim that women and men are different in respect to their right to self-determination. For Kant the sublime and the noble are meant for man. Specifically, for a woman to seek after the noble is to give up what she is and to try to become a man.

Deep meditation and a long-sustained reflection are noble, but difficult, and do not well befit a person in whom unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature. Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex...A woman who has a head full of Greek...might as well even have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously the mien of profundity for which she strives. 4

This view could be ignored if it were not so generally accepted by western male philosophers. In another paper I have shown that Aristotle and Kierkegaard maintained precisely the same position. 5 If you compare

3 Immanuel Kant, Of the Beautiful and Sublime, Goldthwait trans., University of California Press, Berkeley, 1965, pp. 76-7.

4 Kant, Op. Cit., p. 78.

5 Garside, "Can a Woman be Good in the Same Way as a Man?" in Dialogue, Canadian Philosophical Review, Vol. X, 1971, No. 3, pp. 534-544. My arguments in the present paper presuppose the validity of the conclusions reached in the previous one. Therefore, I will not present the arguments for this position again.

what they claim is necessary for a person to be good with what they claim is possible for a woman, the result is that a woman can not ultimately be good. Another way of saying this is that for a woman to attempt to achieve the practical wisdom of Aristotle, to live the true Christianity of Kierkegaard, or to follow the categorical imperative of Kant is to attempt to become a man.

In all three of these philosophers the crucial point is the relation between self-determination and reflection. For Kant, "Her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense";⁶ for Aristotle her virtue is "not wisdom, but only true opinion";⁷ and for Kierkegaard "No woman is able to endure a dialectical reduplication, and everything Christian has a dialectical element in it."⁸ Since reflection on oneself and on one's life as a whole is an essential part in actively choosing a life goal it follows that women can not be self-determined. For these philosophers the right to self-determination extends only to men.

It is my claim that this view is fundamentally wrong because it confused the activity of self-determination with the product. If we examine this confusion and in terms of reflection it can be expressed as a mixing of the faculty of reflection and the content of the

⁶ Kant, Op. Cit., p. 79.

⁷ Aristotle, 1277^b 28.

⁸ Kierkegaard, The Last Years (Journals, 1853-55), The Fontana Library, 1968, p. 69.

reflection. Both women and men have the same faculty by virtue of being human, but what it is that is reflected on is different in many ways by virtue of their being female or male. Similarly, both men and women are able to be self-determined by virtue of being persons; what kind of self-determined person they will be, however, will differ because the basic data of their determination is different. This means that women will always be different from men as the result of self-determination because we differ in physical structure, we differ in our present social experience, we differ in our inherited past and so on.

I suspect that it was in some part due to the fear of loss of polarity between the sexes which led to the traditional denial of self-determination for women. This fear, however, is groundless for a true polarity will emerge when women and men press forward in active self-determination. It might be helpful to look at one philosopher who recognized that self-determination was not a defining male characteristic in order to discover how it was that he justified this view.

Two major problems jump to the surface when one first attempts to come to terms with Plato's views on women. The first is the diversity of contemporary interpretations of Plato on women and the second is the seeming contradiction about women found in the dialogues

themselves. Needless-to-say, the first problem is directly related to the second.

Although there are many examples of the first problem I will limit the discussion to one - Simone de Beauvoir. In The Second Sex there are only three references to Plato, but each one takes a different aspect to emphasize. In one she is discussing the feelings of superiority men have had historically:

The first among the blessings for which
Plato thanked the gods that he had
been created free, not enslaved; the 9
second, a man, not a woman.

In another reference she mentions his vision of the emancipation of women:

Plato envisioned a communal regime
and promised women an autonomy in it 10
such as they enjoyed in Sparta.

And finally she refers to the essential bisexuality of humanity:

However, even if a man can subjectively
go through erotic experiences without
women being present, she is objectively
implied in his sexuality: as Plato says 11
in the myth of Androgynes, the organism
of the male supposes that of the female.

9 Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Parshley trans.,
Bantam Books, U.S.A., p. xxi.

10 de Beauvoir, Op. Cit., p. 103.

11 de Beauvoir, Op. Cit., p. 150.

It is suprising that a philosopher like de Beauvoir could rest content with such a superficial account of Plato on women. Anyone who has read the Symposium carefully knows that Plato is making fun of the myth of Androgynes. Aristophenes, in recording this myth, states that there were originally three¹² sexes: man-man, man-woman, and woman-woman. After these were split the descendants searched for their counterpart. There is no doubt that the woman-man union was seen as inferior to the man-man union and superior to the woman-woman union. In the light of this de Beauvoir's use of this myth to support the claim¹³ of the inherent bi-sexuality of persons is suspect.

However, the kind of ambiguity reflected in de Beauvoir is found in many contemporary women when it comes to Plato. On the one hand, they want to applaud his visionary belief that women should be given equal opportunities in society, that the family structure must be changed to allow this equality, and so on. On the other hand, they sense a hatred of women in his views on homo-sexuality -- with his adoration of ideal women coupled with his ex-¹⁴clusion of real women.

¹² Plato, Symposium, 190.

¹³ It is interesting to note that Karl Stern in The Flight from Woman makes the same mistake. See The Flight From Woman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p.11.

¹⁴ In the Symposium we find Socrates being taught about wisdom and love by Diotima while the flute girl joins the other women outside the gathering. There is some dispute, however, about Diotima being a mythical figure as Mary Beard points out in Woman as Force in History, Collier Books, New York, pp. 324-5. Even if there were women philosophers they certainly were not included in Socrates' gatherings.

The next question to be faced is whether this conflict is inherent in Plato or is there some consistent doctrine about women throughout the dialogues. The answer to this question depends upon the importance one gives to the myths Plato includes in his dialogues. Friedlander claims that Plato uses myths on three levels:

On the first level, the myth stands at the threshold of the Socratic world...on the second level, Socrates himself takes hold of the myth...on the third level, Socrates 15 is seized by divine mania.

The important point about Friedlander's insights into the use of myth in Plato is that when we are struggling to reach an understanding of the true view of Plato on a particular problem we must penetrate the third and second level of myths. In the present case where we seek to find his view on women we must turn to the myths of the origin of women and men particularly in the Timaeus and the Phaedrus.

In the Phaedrus we learn that the soul is immortal (245), that it has a vision of the divine (247), that if it is not strong enough it goes through a process of rebirth (248), and that in this process during the first birth it takes on the body of a man. The Timaeus adds to our knowledge of this process as regards women:

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Paul Friedlander, Plato, An Introduction, Hans Meyerhoff trans., Harper Torchbooks, New York, pp. 207-8.

Of the men who came into the world, those who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation. (91)

Plato had a vision of the person which was separate from sex. The soul was neither female nor male. One was first a person, then during the first birth a man, and during the second possibly a woman.

It is important to understand the main point Plato is making here before we discuss his views on the liberation and education of women. What it is to be a person exists prior to what it is to be a woman or a man. Their
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original nature is the same.

The difficulty is that a woman reading the Timaeus could easily come away with the impression that Plato hates women. In addition to this premise that women were previously cowards or unrighteous men we find in this particular dialogue another view which is equally outdated and incorrect. He says:

For the present we have only to conceive of three natures; first, that which is in process of generation; secondly, that in which the generation takes place; and thirdly, that of which the thing generated is a resemblance. And we may liken the receiving principle to a mother, and the source or spring to a father, and the intermediate nature to a child. (50)

It would be easy on first reading to conclude from this that he is saying women or mothers should be like matter - viz., formless. On closer inspection, however, this conclusion dissolves. Plato along with his contemporaries misunderstood conception and believed that the woman only provided a receptical for the male seed. The dual aspect of conception - that new life needs two sources - has been a discovery of modern genetics. In his attempt to explain the metaphysical categories of form and matter Plato drew upon a common misconception. What he meant by source or form and receiving principle or matter still remains tenable even though our understanding of mother and father have changed. We must be careful not to argue from the example or the analogy to the underlying metaphysical categories. Unfortunately, too many philosophers have done so to the detriment of women. For example, with Aristotle the metaphysical categories of form and matter have become prescriptive for women and men in a way Plato avoided by his expression 'we may liken...'

The female always provides the material,
the male that which fashions it, for
this is the power that we say they
each possess, and this is what is
meant by calling them male and female. ¹⁷

In short Plato did not tie the nature of women or man down to common beliefs. He used them where applicable

¹⁷ Aristotle 738^b 20.

to draw out his metaphysical presuppositions. If these beliefs were to change Plato could easily have changed his examples. The reason for his flexibility is, I believe, his underlying thesis about what it is to be a person.

We are now in a position to come to terms with Plato's views on self-determination for women. In the Republic Socrates asks Glaucon:

You will admit that the same education which makes a man a good guardian will make a woman a good guardian; for their original nature is the same? (456)

If women and men were born in a particular body because of their previous life and if the purpose of life is to become progressively enlightened about truth then it follows that all people should receive the best possible education, that all should be encouraged to seek wisdom, that all should be encouraged to seek wisdom, that all should be able to live the kind of life which reflects the degree of wisdom attained. In the Republic and in the Laws Plato develops his views on how we can best become reunited with that from which we have been separated. How can we return to the divine?

Since for Plato all evil is due to ignorance, the purpose of a good society should be to rid its members of as much ignorance as possible. To know the good is to do the good. And since the amount of good or evil in a society is

directly related to the number of good or evil people in the society, it follows that all members of that society should seek to get rid of ignorance. ¹⁸

And I further affirm, that if these things are possible, nothing can be more absurd than the practice which prevails in our own country, of men and women not following the same pursuits with all their strength and with one mind, for thus the state, instead of being a whole, is reduced to a half. ¹⁹

Women must receive the same education as men for two reasons: first because they are persons and second because not to educate them is to weaken the state. The second reason is reflected in Plato's views on genetics as well as in his concern with socialization. In the Republic the most perfect should mate together most and the least perfect least. ²⁰

It is clear now that women must be given the same opportunities for growth in a good society as men; and as is well known Plato even believed women should be allowed to be guardians of the state if they had the right character. ²¹

Men and women alike possess the qualities which make a guardian; they differ only in their comparative strength or weakness. ²²

So what appeared at first glance to be a contradictory

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- 18 Plato Republic 456.
19 Plato Laws 560.
20 Plato Laws 775.
21 Plato Republic 455.
22 Plato Republic 456.

view on the nature of woman turns out to be quite consistant. To summarize briefly, Plato believed that all persons exist independently from and prior to their bodies, that some are born as men, some reborn as women, that the purpose of life is to achieve as much perfection as possible in order to escape the cycle of rebirth, that to achieve this purpose all persons in a society should be given the best education and the same opportunities for self-determination. In view of our major task in this paper we can safely say that Plato would agree with both statements 1) All persons have the right to self-determination and 2) Women have been denied the right to self-determination. Of course, he sets definite limits to self-determination which depend upon self-fulfillment and the fulfillment of society as a whole, but this is another issue.

For Plato the reason women should have the right to self-determination is because they are persons. Even though he would agree that in general women are inferior to men he none-the-less realizes that they are not different as far as the right to self-determination should be concerned. For Plato this equality is due to the belief in the pre-existence of the soul. We are now in the peculiar position of discovering that the only philosopher who stands out before the nineteenth century as agreeing with my thesis that women and men are alike in respect to their right to self-determination justifies his claim on the more basic belief in the pre-existence of the soul. For Aristotle, Kant or

Kierkegaard there was never any question of a person existing as devoid of sexuality - for them there were only women and men. And in this I would be forced to agree.

Is it necessary to have recourse to a prior bodyless state in order to allow for equal status for self-determination? The answer to this is negative, although there is no question that the body plays a central role in the tradition of denial of self-determination for women.

In the essay The Subjection of Women J.S. Mill examines what he takes to be the basis for this denial.

The adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society. It rose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman (owing to the value attached to her by men, combined with her inferiority in muscular strength) was found in a state of bondage to some man. Laws and systems of polity always begin by recognizing the relations they find already existing between individuals. They convert what was a mere physical fact into a legal right. 23

For Mill the person is not a pre-existing soul and yet we find a recognition of woman's right to self-determination. The body is central to the definition of the individual, but size or comparative physical strength becomes irrelevant. Men and women are persons because they can be self-defined. To be an individual is to employ all the faculties available.

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. 24

And it goes without saying that for Mill women and men have the same faculties. They sense, they imagine, they reflect, they choose; in short they are able to be self-determined.

He who would rightly appreciate the worth of personal independence as an element of happiness, should consider the value he himself puts upon it as an ingredient of his own...let him rest assured that whatever he feels on this point, women feel in a fully equal degree. 25

IV

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have demonstrated that the right to self-determination can not be justified by an appeal to consequences - that it is its own justification. Furthermore, this right either applicable to all persons or to none. The only reason why it is necessary to refer to women's liberation in this context is because the right to self-determination has usually been denied to women. Liberation is necessary from the mistaken belief that men are unique

24 Mill, "On Liberty", Op. Cit., p. 78.

25 Mill, "The Subjection of Women", Op. Cit., p. 543.

by virtue of their ability to reflect and women by their ability to intuit.²⁶ Similarly, liberation is necessary from the confused claim that when a woman begins to assert her ability for self-determination she is becoming a man.²⁷ I have shown how this view is mistaken - that it focuses on faculties and activities instead of content and product.

Further, it was seen that while Plato understood that women should be self-determined he did not give a foundation for it which is acceptable to the twentieth century mind. Mill, on the other hand, openly appealed to a common ground of human experience saying that what men see as a right for themselves women equally desire - unless, of course, they have been deformed by their experience to such an extent that they willingly abdicate what is rightfully theirs.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my belief that there is no need to fear loss of polarity when women do achieve liberation on the level of self-determination. Unfortunately, even many of the women writing today on the subject seem to think otherwise. They believe that 'after the revolution' there will exist only individuals.²⁸

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Stern Op. Cit. The absurdity of this position is carried throughout the book in which he castigates men for fleeing from intuition.

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As mentioned previously - both Kant and Kierkegaard made this extreme claim.

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Shulamith Firestone is particularly guilty of this in The Dialectic of Sex, Bantam Books, 1970. It is not surprising that she ties this view to a total rejection of female biological experience.

There is no way that women can ever become identical to men.²⁹ Nor is there any reason why they should desire to do so. The heritage and experience of women is as rich as the heritage and experience as men; and once women recognize their right to self-determination and release their creative energies into the world this will be obvious.

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Kate Millett in Sexual Politics recognizes this and calls for a re-examination of the desirability of some of the traits considered as exclusively masculine or feminine not a rejection of sexual polarity altogether. Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 62.

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